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A pedagogical examination of the potential of Iyengar yoga for trauma

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, interest in the therapeutic potential of yoga for people recovering from trauma has flourished. To date, much of this research on yoga for trauma adopts a quantitative methodology that positions yoga as a medicalised intervention to understand if yoga is 'effective' for trauma recovery for adults. This paper seeks to contribute to an emerging body of qualitative literature by drawing on the voices of eight Iyengar yoga teachers with experience teaching adult students with trauma. It reveals that the teachers do not hold themselves out to be specialists in trauma, nor do they rely on formulaic principles or knowing a person's trauma narrative. Rather, they draw on the pedagogic skills they have developed more generally through their considerable experience of teaching yoga as an embodied practice to tailor their approach for their students. Of central interest is the way the teachers use their own bodies, particularly their sensory perceptions, to 'read' the bodies and emotional capacities of their students within each teaching session. The teachers also reflect on the way they use adjustments as part of their embodied pedagogic skills in nuanced ways that challenge the dominant no-touch discourse on teaching students with trauma. These pedagogic approaches offer important insights for movement teachers more generally, particularly those teaching vulnerable students.

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Introduction

Interest in the therapeutic potential of embodied practices such as yoga has flourished over the past two decades. So too has the awareness of the ubiquitous nature of trauma, its many causes and ongoing impacts (Telles et al., 2012). At the intersection of these trends, the past two decades has seen an explosion of interest in yoga as a therapeutic aid for trauma (Balasubramaniam et al., 2013; Macy et al., 2018; Nyuyeng Feng et al., 2018). To date, much of the research on yoga for trauma is quantitative in nature and focused on adult participants, positioning yoga as a medicalised 'intervention' to examine its 'effectiveness' for trauma recovery (Macy et al., 2018). Comparatively little research attention has been paid to the role of pedagogy in teaching yoga for trauma recovery. In the small but emerging literature on yoga pedagogy for trauma, attention has been drawn to the importance of pedagogic principles such as agency and safety to safeguard students with trauma (Emerson, 2015). Similar themes are discussed in the literature on teaching physical education to students with trauma (Quarby et al., 2021). What has remained largely unexplored in these discussions on pedagogy for trauma is how a teacher draws on their own embodiment and teaching experience to enact these concepts. This paper seeks to expand and challenge the discussion on pedagogy of

yoga for trauma drawing on a study of Iyengar yoga teachers with experience teaching adult students with trauma. Drawing on Shilling's (2007, 2017) concept of body pedagogics and Lusted's (1986) theory of pedagogy, it draws attention to two interrelated and unexplored skills engaged by the teachers: the way the teachers *read* the bodies of students to inform their choices in the learning exchange and how this informs their decisions around adjusting students. This discussion offers important insights to other teachers of movement, particularly those teaching vulnerable students including those recovering from trauma.

Trauma and yoga

Our understanding of trauma has dramatically expanded over the past few decades through the shared insights of trauma survivors, health care professionals along with medical advancements, such as brain scans (van der Kolk, 1994). The concept of individual trauma is defined by the United States Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association (2014) in the following way:

Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (p. 9)

Leading trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk (2014) observes that trauma 'results in a fundamental reorganisation of the way the mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only the way we think and what we think about, but also our capacity to think' (p. 21). Over the past two decades, psychiatrists and trauma experts have become increasingly aware that traditional talk-centred therapies are often inadequate for trauma survivors as trauma became to be understood as 'trapped' (van der Kolk, 1994, p. 253) or 'remembered' in the body (Rothchild, 2000, p. 1). This has led to the growing interest by trauma professionals and researchers in therapeutic practices directed to the body, including yoga. To date, most of the research on yoga for trauma has been led by the medical and scientific profession and adopted a quantitative approach to evaluate if yoga is 'effective' in addressing trauma. In this research, yoga is positioned as the 'intervention', mainly for adult participants, ranging from as short as two days to less than three months in most cases (Cramer et al., 2018; Macy et al., 2018) and measured using known scientific instruments. Macy et al. (2018) conducted a systematic meta-review of 13 literature reviews consisting of 185 distinct studies and concluded that yoga shows potential for improving depression, anxiety, PTSD and the psychological impact of trauma, 'at least in the short-term' (p. 52). Summarising the literature, the authors offer insights into how yoga works to address trauma related symptoms. They note that yoga is not like similar movement practices such as gymnastics as it has a mental component that requires intentional thought. This component offers the possibility to alter cognition by decreasing negative thoughts and encouraging adaptive thinking. It is also speculated that the physical nature of asana (poses) practice promotes positive physiological changes by altering neurotransmitters in the brain and assisting to regulate the body's physical stress response (Macy et al., 2018). The authors note, however, that their ability to form conclusions on the effectiveness of yoga for trauma is severely hampered by the diversity of styles of yoga and the methodological designs.

Iyengar yoga, the style of yoga which is the subject of this paper, is based on the teachings of Indian yogi, B.K.S. Iyengar (1918–2014). Today Iyengar yoga is taught across the globe and is known for its body of therapeutic knowledge (De Michelis, 2005). Eleven published studies examine the effectiveness of Iyengar yoga for the trauma related conditions of anxiety, stress, depression and suicide ideation in adults. Three of these studies are randomised-controlled trials (Michalsen et al., 2012; Streeter et al., 2010, 2020), and the remaining eight are quasi-experimental (Bowden et al., 2014; Harner et al., 2010; Michalsen et al., 2005; Nyer et al., 2018; Shapiro & Cline, 2004; Shapiro et al., 2007, 2008; Streeter et al., 2017; Woolery et al., 2004). Read together, these studies suggest that Iyengar yoga is effective in addressing depression, anxiety, stress and suicide

ideation, although more research is needed specifically on students recovering from trauma. The Iyengar yoga quantitative literature echoes, and in some cases, furthers the broader yoga literature on how yoga *works* to bring about changes to trauma related conditions, including reducing stress and bringing about increased function of the autonomic nervous system through stimulating the vagus nerve (Streeter et al., 2012, 2020) and the impact of yoga on increasing the activity of the GAMA system to facilitate homeostasis in the body (Streeter et al., 2020). Some studies have also pointed to the specific characteristics of Iyengar yoga that facilitate improvements in moods, including the intentional focus required by Iyengar yoga, the role of mastery, along with the emphasis on lifting and opening of the chest facilitated through active poses such as standing poses and backbends to deepen breathing (Shapiro & Cline, 2004; Streeter et al., 2010). This literature represents an important foundation for understanding the potential of Iyengar yoga for trauma through a medicalised, scientific lens.

In recent years, some researchers have observed the limitations of studying a holistic practice like yoga through a scientific lens (Kirkwood et al., 2005; Macy et al., 2018). As Macy et al. (2018, p. 52) observe, 'the scientific requirements necessary to rigorously investigate yoga's effects might intentionally dismantle its potential benefits'. This points to the need for research to consider not only the effectiveness of yoga as an outcome, but as an embodied *process*. In line with these observations, a small body of research is beginning to emerge that highlights the less measurable aspects of yoga for trauma relief. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its close links to Western medical trauma researchers, much of the emerging qualitative literature focuses on the experiences of participants doing a form of yoga called 'Trauma Sensitive Yoga' as an adjunct aid in recovery to talk-based therapies (e.g. Guiden & Jennings, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2014; Nolan, 2016; West et al., 2017). Based heavily on the work of prominent trauma psychiatrist, van der Kolk, Trauma Sensitive Yoga is positioned as part of the tools available to clinicians and therapists and emphasises pedagogic principles such as safety and agency (Emerson, 2015; Ong, 2021). It may be argued that this approach reflects a privileging of Western medical knowledge about how to address trauma. What remains largely unexamined in this literature on yoga and movement pedagogy for students with trauma is the *embodied* and *relational* nature of teaching yoga and how this develops over time to facilitate principles such as agency and safety in the learning exchange. In this paper, we adopt an embodied pedagogic lens to discuss the findings of a study conducted on eight Australian Iyengar yoga teachers with experience teaching adult students with trauma to examine these underexplored concepts.

To be clear, Iyengar yoga is not a method devised specifically for addressing trauma. Rather, it is a method where teachers draw from their own teaching experience which is informed by rich institutional resources that are not paralleled in other styles of yoga (De Michelis, 2005). Documented accounts of Iyengar yoga teachers teaching students with trauma include teaching in the relief camps following the earthquake in Gujarat, India in 2001, in New York following the 9/11 attacks (Mehta, 2017), to people recovering from alcohol and drug addiction in India (Kripa Foundation, 2022) and for students during the Covid-19 pandemic (Steinberg, 2020). The teachers involved in this research discussed teaching students who have experienced interpersonal violence, sudden death of a child, vicarious trauma from working as a front-line responder and students living through the 2019/2020 summer bushfires in Australia. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive or even representative of the Iyengar yoga teaching community, but emphasise the breadth of trauma and the multitude of ways that teachers may come across trauma in their students throughout a lengthy teaching career.

Theoretical framework

Shilling's (2007) concept of body pedagogics and Lusted's (1986) theory of pedagogy were drawn on as tools to understand the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student in the context of students with trauma. Shilling defines 'body pedagogics' as:

[the] central pedagogic means through which a culture seeks to transmit its main corporeal techniques, skills and dispositions, the embodied experience associated with acquiring of failing to acquire the attributes, and the actual embodied changes resulting from this process. (2007, p. 11)

Shilling uses the term 'pedagogics' rather than 'pedagogy' to signal an embodied approach that is distinguished from the largely cognitive focus of educational pedagogy (Mellor & Shilling, 2010). The term 'culture' in this context refers to the 'customary bodily practices, norms, rituals and beliefs of a social group' (Shilling & Mellor, 2007, p. 523). This definition draws attention to the significance of experience and embodied aspects of culture, along with its intellectual and cognitive aspects (Shilling & Mellor, 2007). In the case of this study, culture includes the philosophical foundations of Iyengar yoga, its institutional values, practices and resources and how these specifically relate to teaching students with trauma. By 'skills, techniques and dispositions', it is evident from Shilling's writing that he is interested not only in the technical abilities that are transferred through embodied learning but also the emotional and psychological dispositions and orientations of the culture that are transferred through this process (Mellor & Shilling, 2010). Seen in this way, the transference of specific skills, techniques and dispositions within a specific cultural context produce different embodied experiences, orientations and outcomes for its members (Mellor & Shilling, 2010). For the purpose of this study, body pedagogics offers a framework for examining how the specific pedagogic means of Iyengar yoga aims to provide students with trauma with a distinct embodied experience that orientates students to the Iyengar yoga cultural understanding of suffering and how to address it through yoga.

In this study we take up Shilling's (2017) invitation to look beyond the body pedagogic framework to how Iyengar yoga culture and its specific pedagogic means is enacted between teacher and student *in relationship* with each other through dynamic and relational exchanges in the classroom level. While other researchers have looked to supplement the body pedagogics analysis with approaches founded on the work of John Dewey (Shilling, 2017) we have adopted Lusted's (1986) theory of pedagogy because it extends the notion of pedagogy beyond a mere transmission from teacher to students and invites attention to how teachers and students *produce knowledge together* in an embodied relationship (Wright, 2009).

In *Why Pedagogy?* (1986), Lusted argues that the concept of pedagogy is critically important because it 'draws attention to the *process* through which knowledge is produced' (p. 2, original emphasis). Lusted proposes a model of pedagogy that consists of three inter-connected, dynamic and equally important elements – the teacher, the student and knowledge. Knowledge, according to Lusted, is not a priori and static but is produced through the exchange between teacher and the student. Viewed this way, both the teacher and the student are producers of knowledge. This means that the teacher's methods and techniques are of central interest but they are 'inseparable from what is being taught and crucially, how one learns' (p. 3). This invites an exploration on how the exchange between the teacher and student can bring about the possibility of transformation for either of them, despite their positioning as 'teacher' or 'student'. This is not to deny that there exists a power dynamic between the student and the teacher. Rather, Lusted contends that pedagogy, as he conceptualises it, becomes the prism through which issues of agency, power dynamics and the production of knowledge can be examined. Research in health education (Wright, 2009) and dance (Garrett & Wrench, 2016) has extended Lusted's theory to embodied learning. Significantly for the purpose of this paper, both Shilling and Lusted's theories recognise educational exchanges beyond the formal education classroom and into somatic learning experiences, such as the yoga class.

Methods

Data for the discussion in this paper have been drawn from a study designed to understand the potential of Iyengar yoga as a therapeutic aid for trauma. The two key research questions that

motivated this discussion were concerned with identifying: (i) the central pedagogic means through which Iyengar yoga teachers transmits the skills, dispositions and techniques to students who have experienced trauma; and (ii) the relational dynamics of their teaching based on Lusted's theory of pedagogy discussed above. These broader questions were translated into interview questions about the teachers' experiences of teaching students with trauma, their pedagogic choices and what they had learnt from these experiences. These formed the basis for semi-structured interviews which were conducted face-to-face or online and lasted for between 90 and 180 min.

In recruiting participants, the focus was on teachers with some knowledge or experience of Iyengar yoga for trauma. Here the intention was not to be exhaustive or representative of the Iyengar yoga teaching community globally or within Australia but to draw on teachers with rich teaching experience that included students with trauma. Teachers were recruited through the Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia, through the personal connections of the researchers who are involved in the Iyengar yoga community and through snowballing. All eight teacher participants, six women and two men, were Iyengar yoga teachers based in Australia; four of the eight were senior teachers. At the time of the study, the teachers were aged between 40 and 71 years. The four senior teachers had, on average, practiced Iyengar yoga for 40 years and taught for 35 years. All four teachers taught Iyengar yoga full-time and made regular visits to the Ramamani Iyengar Yoga Memorial Institute in Pune to practice under the Iyengar family. All had been direct students of B.K.S. Iyengar. The four teachers who were not accredited at a senior level also had considerable experience, having practiced on average for 24 years and taught for 14 years. Two teachers ran their own studios in regional towns and the other taught classes in larger regional areas. All but one teacher taught Iyengar yoga as their main occupation.

Only one of the eight teachers held specific classes for students who had been referred to her by a psychologist. For most of the teachers, their experience of teaching students with trauma centred around their existing students, some whom they had taught for several decades, and who had continued to attend class after a traumatic event occurred. Other times students sought out the teacher in the aftermath of a traumatic event. In addition, some teachers had experience teaching people who had experienced trauma as a collective, such as teachers who continued their general classes through bushfire affected areas in summer 2019/2020.

Key Iyengar yoga syllabus texts, writings by senior Iyengar yoga teachers and online materials, including social media content, together with academic sources that address the history and philosophy of contemporary yoga were drawn on to provide a philosophical and cultural context for the teachers' accounts. In addition, the researchers drew from their own experience as practitioners of the Iyengar yoga method (first and second author) and as a certified Iyengar yoga teacher (first author) to facilitate an understanding of the interview data. Both the second and third authors are experienced HPE teacher educators. To analyse the interview data, each teacher's transcript and relevant documents were initially coded inductively, using QSR Nvivo 11, to identify particular themes. Further analysis involved drawing on the theoretical framework to answer the research questions.

Findings

Iyengar yoga and body pedagogics

What began with Westerners seeking out B.K.S. Iyengar in India in the 1950s has led to a global proliferation of his method (De Michelis, 2005). Today Iyengar yoga is highly institutionalised through a network of accredited teachers based in over 95 countries in the world (RIMYI, 2020). Senior teachers around the world are key knowledge holders responsible for training and accrediting teachers at the national or local level based on standards administered by the Iyengar family through the Ramamani Memorial Institute in Pune, India (De Michelis, 2005).

A feature of Iyengar's writing and teaching is the combination of spiritual and philosophical writing alongside a Western medical discourse around the body (Lea, 2009). The central pedagogic means of Iyengar yoga is asana (poses). Iyengar's method takes some 200+ poses along with a series of pranayama (breathing techniques) and creates sequences designed to facilitate a particular physical or emotional outcome. For example, a sequence may be designed to work on the hips or lower back or to address anxiety or depression (Iyengar, 1966). Inversions, particularly headstand and shoulderstand are important poses for more advanced students, with beginner students doing adapted and more accessible versions of these poses. Props (blankets, belts and bolsters) are used to support students of different levels to access poses and for restorative poses (Iyengar, 1966; De Michelis, 2005). Instructions are given directly to the body, to bring the student to the here and now and to facilitate a mapping of the body, both internally and externally. The primacy of asana and the way it is taught is intended to develop a knowledge of the self through the primacy of personal experience (Goode, 2015). For students with trauma, it offers a method of practice that does not rely on cognitive reasoning or language. Students can learn Iyengar yoga without the need to re-tell the narrative of their traumatic experiences as the method directs attention to the body as the primary site for learning. Students are not required to adopt any spiritual or philosophical beliefs but gain knowledge through personal experience.

Neither the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali nor the comprehensive published literature written by B.K.S. Iyengar about his method make any specific mention of the term 'trauma' as it is understood in contemporary Western medicine. Read together, however, these texts detail a comprehensive philosophy on the mind, body, consciousness and suffering from which we can make sense of the Iyengar yoga approach to students with trauma. In this paper, we can only briefly touch on these concepts.

In both the Yoga Sutras and key Iyengar texts, suffering is viewed as inevitable, ubiquitous, part of the condition of being human. The pathway of yoga is to gain detachment from this suffering. In *Light on Life*, Iyengar states:

The pain is there as a teacher because life is filled with pain. In the struggle alone, there is knowledge. Only when there is pain will you see the light. Pain is your guru. As we experience pleasures happily, we must also learn not to lose our happiness when pain comes. As we see good in pleasure, we should learn to see good in pain. Learn to find comfort even in discomfort. We must not try to run from pain but to move through and beyond it. This is the cultivation of tenacity and perseverance, which is a spiritual attitude towards yoga. This is also the spiritual attitude towards life. (2005, p. 47)

The normalisation of suffering was echoed by the teachers in the interviews. Some teachers commented that they considered that all their students were traumatised, to greater or lesser extent. Senior Teacher Three observed the different ways trauma manifests in her students in the following way: 'It's a mixture between down-playing the trauma that's living there, never getting any air to it, or they've focused on the trauma. It's both of them'. At the same time, the teachers were quick to point out that they were not therapists. Teacher Six said: 'As teachers we should never try to take the role of the therapist ... I'm a yoga teacher'.

Some teachers discussed how they themselves had experienced profoundly traumatic events. For some, these events were the catalyst for taking up yoga, whereas others were already Iyengar yoga practitioners. They made sense of these events as part of the condition of living that may be overcome through the practice of asana in the Iyengar method.

Iyengar's writings and the teacher interviews reveal that Iyengar yoga is premised on a belief that each person, at their core, has a perfect and pure existence. This means that deep change is possible through the practice of asana, which comes about through incremental change over time (Iyengar, 1966, 2001, 2005). In the case of students who had experienced trauma or severe emotional disturbance, the teachers described witnessing some changes within a relatively short time, including improvements in stability, vitality, integration, a sense of being present and confidence. Senior Teacher Three said: 'They're on a trajectory, aren't they. You see freedom in them, you see lightness

over time. But the first thing I wouldn't say is "I'm seeing your body change" The first thing I'd say is "I see your excitement about the subject increasing".

What is striking about these changes is that they can be observed and sensed but not always measured in Western medical terms. They represent changes both at the physical level but also at the mental and emotional levels of the person. The teachers also described how over time they witnessed students developing more profound and lasting changes, such as a greater sense of connection to their bodies, a deeper capacity to trust and listen to the body. That is, students begin by learning from the teacher but over time they developed their own agency and increasingly learned from their own body (Goode, 2015; Iyengar, 2005). Senior Teacher Two described this as: 'I'll observe you, I'll witness you, until you learn to witness yourself'.

As an overarching premise, in teaching students with trauma or vulnerability, choices of poses within teaching sequences were designed around stability and integration in the body, rather than perfecting the pose. Teachers also emphasised the need to individualise teaching. In the words of Senior Teacher One:

You can have a sequence but in what way? With what supports? How much to give? It's very individual to that particular person – psychologically how brave or courageous or how much they want to push themselves or how timid they are body-wise. Maybe this is a whole new experience for them, And physically are they a little more able? Have they done yoga before?

Reflecting on how she varied her teaching choices for students who had experienced sexual assault, Senior Teacher Three said:

Like for something like Baddha Konasana (bound ankle pose), I'd bring the legs in, open up the eyes, maybe do something against the wall, another pose where you have the same action, but without being in such an exposed and difficult, vulnerable situation.

This is not to say there were not some general principles. Students were encouraged to keep their eyes open even in restorative poses, so as not to fall into memory (this is also a principle described in B.K.S Iyengar's sequence for teachers in the aftermath of 911 as described in Mehta, 2017). While restorative poses were useful as part of the pedagogic toolkit, they needed to be carefully placed to keep students engaged in the present moment. Some teachers spoke about how their choice of poses was designed to open the chest to facilitate breathing rather than instructing students to focus on their breath, which they had found to be unhelpful, particularly for beginner students. In the words of Senior Teacher One:

There's a question of balancing out, depending on the person, so as a broad thing, all right, it would be really good to open their chest. But how much will depend on, partly their willingness to take on, but where they're at.

This emphasis on the importance of opening the chest echoes the findings of the quantitative literature in speculating how Iyengar yoga works to be effective for depression (Shapiro & Cline, 2004; Streeter et al., 2010). All teachers echoed the Iyengar writings, by maintaining that pranayama (breathing exercises) was not appropriate for beginner students (Iyengar, 1981). Several teachers also described how they backed off from a lot of verbal instructions when teaching vulnerable students. In the words of Teacher Seven: 'I think the gap between instructions are as important as the instructions to allow students to connect with their bodies'. Teacher Six also discussed the need to allow for space in the following way:

With the [bush]fires, I asked a few questions as they came in, like "how are you coping, what's happening?". One person cried all the way through the class, and I just let her. When she started crying I made a more protective environment around her, I guess. She didn't want to talk, she just wanted to cry during the class, that's what she wanted to do.

This is not to say that every experience of learning Iyengar yoga is positive or therapeutic for every student with trauma. Some of the teachers recognised how students may experience frustration in learning a method that takes regular and practice to develop proficiency and lacks obvious markers

of achievement (see Lea, 2009). The teachers also recognised that for some students with trauma, their bodies were perceived as so unsafe and painful and they could experience overwhelming emotional pain if the teaching was not paced and tailored appropriately.

A number of teachers spoke of their aversion to contemporary discourses around yoga for trauma (outside of the Iyengar method) as positioning the trauma as all defining, failing to see the student beyond the trauma, as an attachment model rather than the pursuit of the yogic path, which was concerned with overcoming suffering through detachment. In the words of Senior Teacher Two:

The practice of yoga, ideally, means that you observe. The term would be a 'dispassionate observation', a culturing of dispassionate observation, which allows you to sit with what rises in you. So, it's actually a witnessing model, and yet what I watch in a lot of things that are evolving, is actually an attachment model. You identify more with your state than to observe a state and its effects upon you. So I've got a fundamental conflict with that approach of centralising the model around how you feel in any moment in time.

Other teachers commented that these forms of yoga are devoid of understanding the critical role of the teacher, reducing yoga for trauma to a 'prescription' delivered by mental health practitioners or inexperienced teachers with no understanding of yoga as a comprehensive and detailed subject. In their view, it was essential that the teacher was knowledgeable about the subject of *yoga* and the relationship between teacher and student was critical to the transmission of learning.

The pedagogic relationship

As indicated above the teachers regarded the relationship between teacher and student as critical in learning yoga as an embodied practice. As Senior Teacher Three explained:

I think it's quite important who the teacher is. ... That that teacher takes this art form or this thing seriously ... I always learn by transmission, I have to say ... You learn by the vibration, in a way ...

But I think you've got to be careful with that as well, because you're only the transmitter. You're not the thing itself, and we all get hooked in that one.

This passage recognises the inherent relationship of power between teachers and their students, a relationship Lusted (1986) acknowledges exists in any relationship between teacher and student. It also recognises that embodied practices such as yoga are transmitted not as intellectual concepts but through the embodied exchange of the teacher and student. This presents challenging and complex power relations, for both student and teacher. According to Lusted (1986, p. 3), teachers are not 'all-knowing' and students are not 'empty vessels', but the teaching exchange involves a constant evolution as co-producers of knowledge. One teacher reflected on how he approached these issues after four decades of teaching experience:

I deliberately keep a degree of distance because some things I might need to say to you are not social. And I also operate inside your social, sort of, guard. I get to see things that people who are intimate with you don't get to see. I get to see you in unguarded ways. I get to see you with yourself. And I go, be careful with that knowledge and be careful with that position. And I think you do not lay claim to that trust. It's negotiated and it can be lost.

This passage illustrates how, although the yoga class represents the enactment of a social institution, it also offers the opportunity for students to engage in a deeply personal practice that may be revealed to the teacher through the students' bodies. This represents a profoundly intimate exchange that occurs between the students' body and the teacher's perceptions and sensory observation, that is, the teacher's making sense of the student through close observation or reading the body.

Reading the body

From an Iyengar yoga perspective, reading bodies can mean looking at the physical structure of the body to observe how the various components, the bones, muscles and ligaments are formed. It can also mean observing the tone of the skin, the flow of blood in the face and the muscles around the

eyes (Iyengar & Iyengar, 2002). This gives the teacher an understanding of the functioning of the body – where the person is open and where there is limitation, where the body is underworking and where it is overworking and strained. When asked how he goes about reading his students' bodies, Senior Teacher Two described his process in the following way:

So if you're asking me how do I watch people, I watch. Now, I wouldn't say it's just your facial expression, but I watch how you interact. Now a lot of the times when I've got a trainee or a teacher with me, I say to them, "Don't adjust them. I want you to watch them. Watch how they behave with themselves. Do they push? When they face discomfort, do they react? Do their eyes change? Watch the breathing change". So, knowing that the senses interact, when you come near, especially with injury, when you come near threat, you often become heightened. And the heightened state makes you hyper-alert. And I watch your senses interact.

In this quote, Senior Teacher Two describes how he uses his senses, particularly observation to observe how tension comes to manifest in his students. This process serves a couple of purposes. First, it helps the teacher to understand how the student is experiencing the practice in that present moment. This helps to inform the teacher's choices about what is possible for the student. This is significant because it enables teachers to make decisions that are not formulaic or presupposed based on a person's trauma narrative or limited by past teaching exchanges, but which reflect the student's capacities at that point in time. The second is that it can assist the teacher to bring the students' awareness to what is happening at the level of the body. Here lies the foundations of the production of knowledge for both teacher and student as they together navigate the individual capabilities, patterns of strain and responses of the student.

Understanding the capacity and disposition of a student through reading their body was described by all teachers as a visual skill developed by Iyengar yoga teachers over time but it also involved more elusive exchanges. While the teachers described the process of reading their students' bodies as being primarily visual, they also described how it involved other forms of sensory engagement that were difficult to express and which evolved through experience. As Senior Teacher Four explained:

The more you teach, the more you see ... it's quite funny because you can kind of see what's happening under baggy pants and stuff like that. You know whether that leg's working or not, whether they're sort of falling through their hips or something like that ... If you're in a class situation, and you're seeing someone ... whose shoulder is pushed right into their neck and sort of straining away and another person is kind of looking free ... your attention is really taken to that the person that's struggling.

What is striking about the quote above is the way the teacher speaks both in terms of anatomical function (the leg is working, the hip is falling) but also in non-anatomical terms, such as freedom, strain, resistance and struggle. This process of reading bodies is thus described as an embodied exchange of information, from the students' bodies to the teachers' senses. It is not merely an intellectual exercise but an embodied skill.

A specific example of how a teacher used her 'reading' of a student's body was provided by Teacher Six, who had taught several students with trauma and continued classes during the bushfires of Summer 2019/2020. In the following quote she describes how she observed the mental and emotional state of her students through the way they positioned their bodies when they first came into class and set up in Supta Baddha Konasana (supine bound ankle pose), a preparatory pose that students set up when they are waiting for the class to start.

Ok, first time when you lie down, arms down. It's not everyone, but it's something to look at. Arms down means you're not safe. Arms over your hands, over your abdomen means that you're not safe to lie out with your arms up and your palms out. You're open, you're really vulnerable. So I see that in say one out of every six new beginners and it's the first thing I address. I say just try it. Some people their hands roll and then they can't do it. Also, the eyes, if they're looking all over the place, eyes can't still, because eyes tell you, I could see it in somebody. You've got the extreme as well, the person that comes in that the chest is so collapsed. It's not always just because they've been a laborer ... I often have a chat to that person later and I'll often find out.

What this passage illustrates so clearly is how, in the context of an Iyengar yoga class where asana is the central pedagogic means, it is often the body that first reveals the emotional disturbance and suffering of the students which may or may not be followed by a verbal exchange between teacher and student. Some senior teachers discussed how more junior teachers might have good intentions to assist their students with trauma but they often lacked the capacity to respond in nuanced ways that respected the students' agency. This was described as 'over-riding the person' or 'applying principles and practices that leave the person behind'.

Adjustment

As the above discussion reveals, the embodied nature of teaching gives the teachers important information to inform their teaching choices. In the Iyengar yoga method, this includes decisions around adjusting students. Adjustments are designed to teach correct action. They may also be used to stabilise a student. They provide an avenue for students to have an embodied *experience* of their instruction without the need to cognitively interpret the teacher's instructions. Central principles for adjustments outlined in the Basic Guidelines for Teacher of Yoga written by B.K.S. Iyengar and Geeta Iyengar (2002) are that the adjustment must be done 'with purity of mind' and only where there is a need (Iyengar & Iyengar, 2002, p. 11).

Contemporary discourses in the wider yoga community have challenged the notion that students give implied consent to be adjusted in asana through their presence in the yoga room (Farhi, 2019; Remski, 2019). This has occurred in the context of the #Metoo movement in which teachers in almost all major styles of yoga have been exposed as abusing students. Iyengar yoga is no exception, with one of the most senior US teachers found to have abused students under the guise of adjustments. In this context, a growing movement in the wider yoga community has advocated for abandoning adjustments, adopting consent cards (or in the case of the US Iyengar community, establishing strict guidelines for obtaining 'affirmed informed consent') (IYNAUS, 2019b). This is currently not the approach embraced by the global regulation of Iyengar yoga or the Australian context where this research was conducted. In these contexts, adjustments are governed by more general ethical principles and processes (IYNAUS, 2019a).

The teacher interviews revealed how situational and context specific their decisions are around adjusting students, particularly new students and those perceived as vulnerable. All teachers indicated that they did not generally adjust beginner students as they first needed to develop a relationship of trust with the student. Some teachers reflected on how contemporary discourses on adjusting had prompted them to consider it was important to first seek explicit consent before adjusting students, whereas other teachers rejected this approach as they considered it undermined the relationship of trust that they had built with their students over time (in some cases over many decades).

The teachers also reflected on what they had learnt through experience teaching students over time. Senior Teacher Four observed his students with trauma being comforted and stabilised when he placed his feet on the feet of the student. This offered stability in an area of the body that was both visible to the student and non-confronting.

Some teachers observed that students might be more open to being adjusted by female teachers than male teachers and this factored into their decisions. Whereas Teacher Five, a woman in her late 60s who taught students with trauma referred to her from a private psychologist, described adjusting as central to her approach to her students after she had developed a relationship with them, Senior Teacher Four, a male teacher in his 60s, described how he very rarely adjusted someone in a private class unless he knew them very well. He also described how when teaching women private classes, he would often do the poses alongside the student to mitigate any intensity or awkwardness.

Overall, teachers expressed the view that done in the right way and in the right context, adjustments were valuable and positive exchanges that could facilitate the embodied learning of a student in a way that transcends language. There was also a recognition that done in the wrong way, even

with the right intent, adjustments could damage the relationship of trust and safety between Iyengar yoga teacher and students. Teacher Seven, who had a background in working with vulnerable people, described how in her early years of teaching she had accidentally triggered a flashback in a relatively inexperienced student by adjusting her from behind. This had resulted in the student never returning and had prompted the teacher to only adjust her long-term students and to think carefully about when this was appropriate. Read together, the teacher interviews indicate that adjusting is a pedagogic skill that develops over time and requires a more nuanced discussion than the no-touch discourse suggests.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, this paper seeks to contribute to the vibrant and diverse literature on teaching yoga and movement to students with trauma by offering an Iyengar yoga voice. Through years of experience in teaching Iyengar yoga, the teachers interviewed in this study revealed how they had developed highly nuanced abilities to read the stress, strain and lived experience of emotional disturbance in the physical bodies of their students. They emphasised that this did not make them experts in trauma but, as teachers of an embodied practice, it placed them in a fiduciary like relationship with their students that required respect, care and a bond of trust for learning to take place. In this way, their teaching approaches, which are founded on years of teaching yoga rather than on a clinical understanding of trauma, share much in common with the trauma-informed principles developed in clinical and institutional settings outside the yoga field (see SAMHA, 2014). Importantly for the yoga classroom, it is through these skills that a teacher can make decisions about what is possible *in each learning exchange* rather than rely on formulaistic and intellectual concepts about how to approach teaching students who have experience trauma or other forms of severe emotional disturbance. This is not to say that the teachers believed that every student would benefit from Iyengar yoga or that all Iyengar yoga teachers taught in ways that would safeguard the vulnerability of students with trauma. Teachers, as well as students, bring their own subjectivities to the learning exchange and these mediate issues of agency and power in situational and contextual exchanges. Nor is it a call that seniority alone in teaching a method is always more effective or appropriate for students with trauma. Rather, it is an invitation to recognise that teaching is itself an embodied practice that evolves and produces knowledge over time in exchange with students. Viewed in this way, we can take up Lusted's (1986) invitation to reject the search for a single pedagogy and to acknowledge the situational and contextual nature of teaching. This approach invites a discussion in the yoga community as it grapples with issues of power, consent and trauma, and offers insights also relevant to the discussions on these themes in the wider community of movement education (see Andersson et al., 2016). A more thorough examination requires the voices of students who have experienced trauma. This opens the possibility for future research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics

The research discussed in this paper was conducted according to the ethics approval of the Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong (Reference: 55953248x1). All participants gave informed consent to participate in this research. In addition, support for the research was obtained by the Ethics Committee of the B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Association of Australia.

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